

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
WITH  
JIMMY AND ROSALYN CARTER

OCTOBER 1991

PLAINS, GEORGIA

INTERVIEW ARRANGED BY JIM WILLIAMS

ORAL HISTORY #1991-29

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HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



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Jim Williams reviewed the draft of this transcript. His corrections were incorporated into this final transcript by Perky Beisel in summer 2000. A grant from Eastern National Park and Monument Association funded the transcription and final editing of this interview.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter answered a series of written questions about their relationship with Harry S and Bess W. Truman. The questions include their personal feelings about the Trumans' performance in the White House and their visits in Independence to the Truman home and library.

Persons mentioned: Harry S Truman, Margaret Truman Daniel, Amy Carter, Bess W. Truman, Eleanor Roosevelt, Julian Bond, George Gallup, Jr., Ralph Nader, Ralph Truman, Nancy Reagan, and Betty Ford.

# **ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH JIMMY AND ROSALYN CARTER**

HSTR INTERVIEW #1991-29

NOTE: The Carters responded on tape to questions submitted in writing.

[WRITTEN QUESTION 1: Did you ever meet Harry S Truman? If so, where and when was your first meeting? (Explain the circumstances of the occasion and other memories.) Where and when were subsequent meetings with Mr. Truman? (Explain the circumstances and any memories of these meetings.)]

JIMMY CARTER: . . . park service concerning Harry Truman. The first question, “Did you ever meet Harry Truman?” No, I never did meet him. In fact, I’ve never met any Democratic president.

[WQ 2: How well did you know President Truman?]

J. CARTER: The second question: “How well did you know President Truman?” I didn’t ever meet him.

[WQ 3: What are your thoughts of Mr. Truman as a person or as Mr. Citizen, as he sometimes called himself? As a fellow President of the United States? How much did you think about him while you were in the White House? Is there anything you can think of to explain why you both have returned to a relatively simple lifestyle in your old hometowns?]

J. CARTER: The third question: as far as Harry Truman was concerned, I thought he was the greatest president of this century. He was always the one that I mentioned when I was asked that question, never anyone else. I thought about him often when I was in the White House. He was involved deeply in

many of the issues that I had to address, and I'll mention that later on in this response, but I felt that he was down-to-earth. He was honest. He told the truth even when it was painful. He didn't try to shift blame for disappointments or failures to other people. He was courageous, and he never ducked an important issue because it might cost him a few points in the public opinion poll. Also, I felt kind of a kinship with him. We both came from a kind of community that was similar in some ways, and we went back home after the election and the service in the White House.

[WQ 4: Have you met Margaret Truman Daniel? If so, where and when? How well do you know her? (If able to) Comment on how Mrs. Daniel handled being the daughter of the president. Both you and the Trumans had a young daughter living with you in the White House. Did you ever feel a special link to the Trumans because of this? Did you ever discuss this aspect of the presidency with the Trumans?]

J. CARTER: The fourth question: I've just met Margaret two or three times at major social events. I remember once I think it was at the Metropolitan Opera performance in New York, or some similar affair. I don't know her well at all. I think she handled being the daughter of the president very well. Of course, the main publicity that was accrued to her was when President Truman defended her singing ability. I thought about Margaret very often when Amy had some confrontations with the press, although Amy was much younger when I was in the White House than Margaret was when President Truman was there.

[WQ 5: When did you first meet Bess Truman? (If this was during his 1980 visit to

Independence, more detailed questions are below. Otherwise, explain the circumstances and memories of the meeting.) How well did you know Mrs. Truman? What is your impression of her as a first lady?]

J. CARTER: I first met, and the only time I met Bess Truman, was when I went to Independence in 1980. I didn't know her well, just that one brief but very friendly visit. As first lady, I thought she performed as she wanted to, which was best. She wasn't as outspoken and evocative and mobile as Eleanor Roosevelt, or even Rosalyn, but I think she performed her duties with dignity and with effectiveness.

[WQ 6: In December 1974, you were in Kansas City for the Democratic Party Mini-Convention. News reports say that this is when your intention to run for the presidency became public, several days before you had planned to make an official announcement in Atlanta. What do you remember about the mini-convention?] [See appendix, item 1.]

J. CARTER: Item number six: I had already let it be known to several people that I was going to run for president. The one thing I remember was that very few people knew who I was. We handed out a very elaborate and costly brochure. It was my first public effort along that line. I remember Gallup had a public opinion poll that was issued during that period of the mini-convention. It had thirty-six prospective Democratic candidates on the list—mine was not one of them—although the list did include Julian Bond and George Gallup, Jr., and others that were relatively unknown. Ralph Nader was one of them I remember.

[WQ 7: During the mini-convention, the Truman Library hosted a gala party for the

Democratic party leaders. What do you recall about your visit to the Truman Library then? Did you have any contact with Mrs. Truman during this visit to Independence?]

J. CARTER: The seventh question: I just remember going to the Truman Library—I was fascinated with it. I had no contact with Mrs. Truman, but I spent some extra time, more than other delegates did, looking at the exhibits, and also I was impressed by the burial place there, which seemed to equate his local service on his gravestone evenly with the White House service. That showed that he hadn't lost touch with his home roots.

[WQ 8: A news report in 1980 said that you had tried to arrange a meeting with Mrs. Truman during your 1976 presidential campaign. Is this true? What happened?] [See appendix, item 2.]

J. CARTER: I don't recall—the eighth question—ever trying to arrange a meeting with Mrs. Truman and being unable to do so.

[WQ 9: Another report said that you tried to call Mrs. Truman on her ninety-third birthday in February 1978, but she was out at the hairdressers so you called back later. What do you remember about this conversation and other conversations you had with Mrs. Truman on the telephone? Did you call her every year?]

J. CARTER: I didn't call her every year—the ninth question—but Rosalyn talked to Bess on a few occasions, I think. She'll be answering questions later on, on this tape.

[WQ 10: Why did you visit Mrs. Truman when you came to Independence in September 1980 on a campaign stop? Did you specifically request this visit,

or was it something your staff suggested as protocol? Did you call Mrs. Truman yourself to ask for the visit?] [See appendix, items 3-6.]

J. CARTER: Well, the tenth question: I was kind of sad in retrospect that I hadn't gone out of my way to go to Independence to meet retired President Truman after I was elected governor. His second cousin, General Lou Truman, who was former commander of the Third Army, was the director of my industry and trade department. He was one of the senior men in the Truman family and would go over to birthday parties and so forth. I thought a couple of times about going over with him just to meet and shake hands with President Truman at least, but I never did do so.

I think the staff members, at my request, arranged for me to make the September 1980 stop to visit with Mrs. Truman. I was delighted to do so, and it was a very nice occasion.

[WQ 11: What were your impressions of the Truman home? WQ 12: Many visitors to the home now remark about how surprisingly common the house and the furnishings are. Did you have the same feeling? WQ 13: Where did you visit with Mrs. Truman? Was it in the living room (the front room with the portrait of Mr. Truman above the mantel)? How long was your visit? Who else was present during your conversation? Were you shown around the rooms on the first floor, perhaps to see Mrs. Truman's first lady portrait or the portrait of Margaret Truman?]

J. CARTER: On the eleventh question: My impressions of the Truman home was it was modest but adequate. It was very friendly and homey. We had a very nice and relaxed chat. Mrs. Truman seemed to be in good spirits. She seemed to



be strong enough to move around and talk. We had just exchanged pleasantries about how it was to live in the White House, how it was to come back home afterwards. She seemed to be perfectly relaxed. I think it was in the front living room where I met with Mrs. Truman, and I think I stayed there about a half hour or so. I don't remember who else was present. I visited very briefly some of the other rooms on the first floor. I don't recall the portraits of Mrs. Truman or Margaret.

[WQ 14: Did Mrs. Truman seem well? Was her voice clear and strong? Did anyone on her staff have to explain what Mrs. Truman was trying to say? WQ 15: What did you talk about with Mrs. Truman? Did you talk about Mr. Truman? What do you remember most about the visit?]

J. CARTER: As I said earlier—fourteenth question—Mrs. Truman did seem well. Her voice was clear and strong. She was obviously very alert and I could understand what she said without assistance from her staff. I obviously expressed my admiration for her husband, and I've already said what we discussed, just routine things about living in the White House and life after the White House, and my admiration for the way they had performed their responsibilities in Washington, both President Truman and Mrs. Truman.

[WQ 16: (Show him the photographs of him and the staff.) (See appendix, item 7.) What do you recall about this photograph and the people in it? The press reported that after you left the home that you commented that Mrs. Truman's staff noted some similarities between you and Mr. Truman. What did you mean by this remark?]

J. CARTER: On the sixteenth question: I don't know where the photograph is, but I doubt

that I would recognize individual people. I was very eager to meet not only the staff but also any servants that were in the house, and I know I shook hands with everybody, exchanged pleasantries with them. I have the photograph.

[WQ 17: How would you describe your reception in Independence that day? About your visit to the Truman Library and to Mr. Truman's grave? Do you recall anything in particular about that day?]

J. CARTER: The seventeenth: Well, the reception in Independence that day was very good. I was receiving the Truman Award, and I made, I think, a very nice speech about President Truman and what he meant to me. I think it might be good for you to get a copy of it and include that [see appendix, item 8]. In fact, I'll include a copy along with this tape. I remember the excitement and the pleasure. This was the first speech that I ever made after I left the White House, so I was very glad to have the honor of being recognized. Just [being] equated in any way with President Truman was obviously something that I relished.

# # #

[WQ 1: How well did you know Mrs. Truman? Did you ever meet her? Speak to her on the phone? Describe these visits.]

R. CARTER: This is Rosalyn Carter. I did not know Mrs. Truman; I never did meet her. I spoke to her a couple of times on the telephone when she was sick, just to let her know that I was thinking about her and concerned about her.

[WQ 2: How would you describe Bess Truman as a first lady? Was there anything about her that you tried to imitate when you were first lady?]

R. CARTER: I thought she was a model of a first lady. She was totally supportive of her husband. I know that she had a very strong influence on him and kept her differences with him private. I tried to do that when Jimmy was president. I always told him things that were my feelings or opinions about issues, but I thought it was best to do it in private like Mrs. Truman did.

[WQ 3: Why did you decide to attend her funeral in 1982? What do you remember about that day in October? How much did you visit with the other first ladies in attendance? (Mrs. Reagan and Mrs. Ford?)] [See appendix, item 9.]

R. CARTER: I did go to her funeral in 1982. I remember sitting with the other first ladies waiting for the ceremony to begin. We sat along by the side of President Truman's grave at the library, and didn't speak very much. I think we were all caught up in a somber mood that day. And once the funeral was over, I spoke to Mrs. Reagan and Mrs. Ford and went through the receiving line and spoke to Margaret Truman, but left almost immediately.

[WQ 4: Did you ever meet President Truman? If so, describe these meetings. WQ 5: What is your impression of Mr. Truman as a person? As a President of the United States?]

R. CARTER: I never did meet President Truman, but Jimmy has always thought he was one of our best presidents ever. In fact, I think he's the president that Jimmy admires most. I remember when we supported him when he was running for president when nobody else around us did. That was when we were in New London, Connecticut, and Jimmy was in the submarine service.

I think Mrs. Truman always seemed like a very strong person who was interested in her family and keeping her family together, which is one of

the most important things in the White House, I think, because there's stress from all sides with so many things going on. The children are always watched by the press when they go out of the White House, and then, of course, the other issues and different world events that happen every day, and I think it very, very important for a first lady to be close to the family.

END OF INTERVIEW

## APPENDIX

1. "Beans Spilled on Peanut Farmer's Race," *The Kansas City Star*, 6 December 1974.
2. "As of now, Carter plans to visit Mrs. Truman," *The Examiner* (Independence, Mo.), 28 August 1980.
3. "Carter greeted with cheers at Truman home," *The Examiner* (Independence, Mo.), 28 August 1980.
4. "Truman spirit opens Carter campaign trail," *The Examiner* (Independence, Mo.), 2 September 1980.
5. "Carter compares tasks to those Truman had," *The Examiner* (Independence, Mo.), 2 September 1980.
6. "Only Secret Service listens as Mrs. Truman, Carter talk," *The Kansas City Star*, 2 September 1980.
7. Photograph of President Carter in the living room of the Truman home with staff members, 2 September 1980. Photo courtesy of the Carter Library.
8. "Carter's award acceptance speech," *The Examiner* (Independence, Mo.), 9 May 1981.
9. "First ladies belong to a nation," *The Kansas City Star*, 19 December 1982.